

A PRACTICAL IN-CLASS DEMONSTRATION OF ACTIVITY THEORY

ADAM LLOYD, PH.D.
UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND
LLOYDA@UMD.EDU

ABC 83RD ANNUAL INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE – OCTOBER 2018



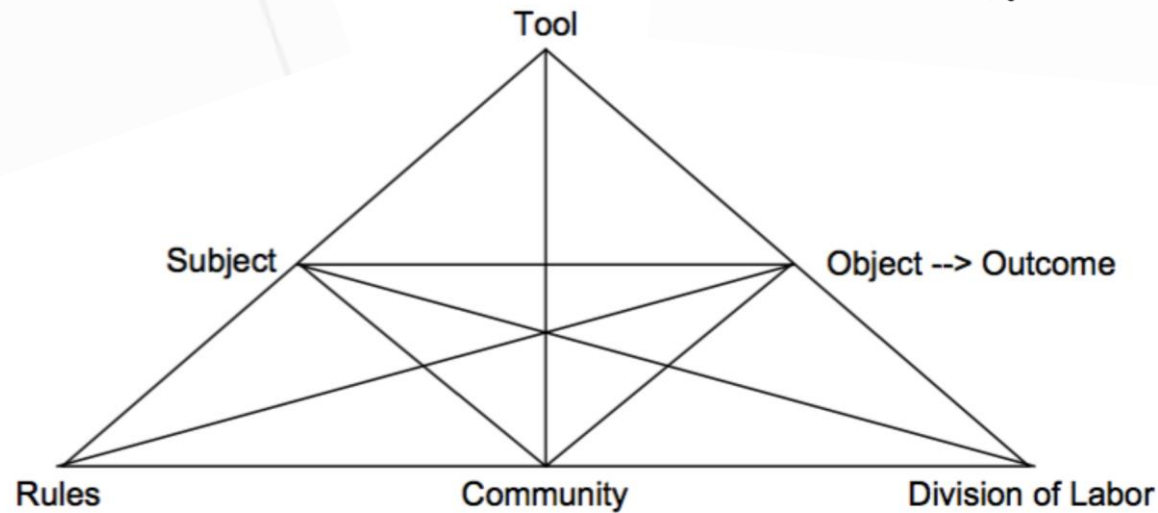
Pseudotransactionality, Activity Theory, and Professional Writing Instruction

Clay Spinuzzi
Iowa State University

11

CLAY SPINUZZI

How Can Technical Communicators Study Work Contexts?



- **Subjects** are participants in an activity, motivated toward a purpose or attainment of the object
- The **object** can be the goal of an activity, the subject's motives for participating in an activity, and the material products that subjects gain through an activity
- **Tools** are socially shared cognitive and/or material resources that subjects can use to attain the object
- Informal or formal **rules** regulate the subject's participation while engaging in an activity
- The **community** is the group or organization to which subjects belong.
- The **division of labor** is the shared participation responsibilities in the activity determined by the community
- The **outcome** is the consequences that the subject faces because of his/her actions driven by the object
 - These outcomes can encourage or hinder the subject's participation in future activities.



Background:

Students are already familiar with Yrjö Engström’s activity system model and have read several articles on activity theory, including Clay Spinuzzi’s, "How Can Technical Communicators Study Work Contexts?," which describes the differences between two separate activity systems engaged in the same activity. At this point in the semester, we are also just beginning to study genres as social action. This activity combines these two areas of study.

Supplies:

- 6 business related artifacts, each representing a distinct genre
- 1 pad of Post-it notes for each student in the class

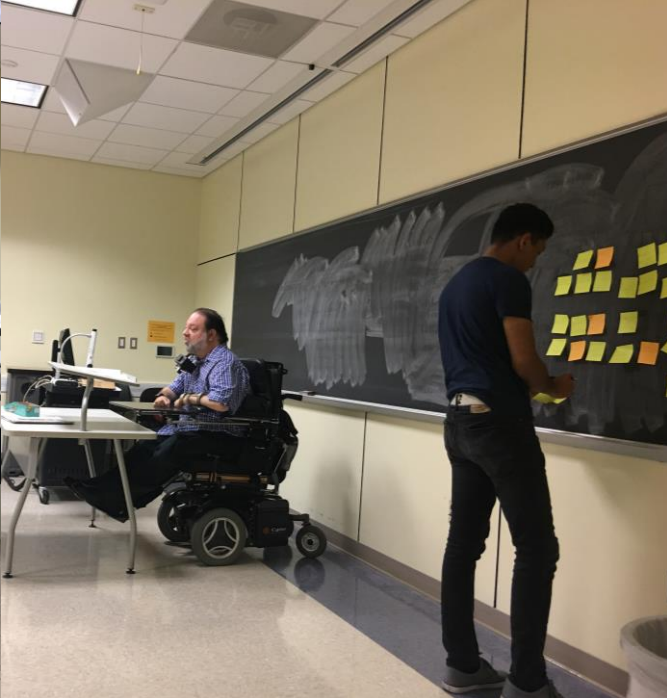
Preparation:

- Divide students into 6 groups
- Give each group a single artifact to analyze
- Give every student 1 pad of Post-it notes

Instructions:

- Students will be asked 7 genre-related questions, one at a time
- Groups have 3 minutes to write down as many answers as they can to each question; **only** one answer per Post-it note
- Groups are to select an area of the classroom wall and will post their answers there before the next question is asked
 - Questions:
 - Identify as many genre categories as you can to which your artifact belongs.
 - What are the formal characteristics of the genre?
 - What is the scene, setting, and rhetorical situation that gave rise to this artifact's creation?
 - What is the genre's purpose (the social action it is intended to enact)?
 - Who are the members of the community that interact with (create and consume) this artifact?
 - What does the artifact/genre reveal about the community's relationships, hierarchies, values, beliefs, and objectives?
 - With what other artifacts and genres does this artifact/genre interact (respond to, anticipate)?
- After all 7 questions have been asked and answered, have the students look around the room at the different arrangements of Post-it notes and point out that 6 distinct activity systems have taken form over the course of this session
- Ask each group, one-by-one, to describe how their group's activity system took shape and operated:
 - What was the division of labor (who did what)?
 - What were the rules that governed their activity (the organization of the Post-it notes)?
 - What tools did each of them use to engage in the activity (physical location within the room, pens, cell phones)?
 - How did each of these elements affect the objective and outcome of the activity?
- Only then, turn to a discussion about their answers to the genre-related questions and how genres enact, form, and reflect a community's social activities.





OUTCOMES

- FIRSHAND PARTICIPATION IN, AND ANALYSIS OF, A FOCUSED ACTIVITY SYSTEM
- CLEAR COMPARISON OF THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN DISTINCT ACTIVITY SYSTEMS ENGAGED IN THE SAME ACTIVITY
- ANALYSIS OF HOW COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE FORM BELIEF SYSTEMS, DEVELOP OBJECTIVES, ESTABLISH RULES & NORMS, AND ASSIGN ROLES & DIVISIONS OF LABOR
- RECOGNITION OF THE EFFECTS THAT TOOLS & MATERIAL CONDITIONS HAVE ON A COMMUNITY'S ACTIVITY

- INSIGHT INTO THE WAYS THAT GENRE BOTH FORMS AND REFLECTS THE VALUES, OBJECTIVES, AND ACTIVITIES OF A PARTICULAR COMMUNITY
- UNDERSTANDING THE SCENES AND SITUATIONS IN WHICH GENRE ARTIFACTS ARISE AND OPERATE
- IDENTIFYING THE CHARACTERISTICS THAT DEFINE PARTICULAR GENRES & THE WAYS CERTAIN ARTIFACTS CAN STRETCH A GENRE OR ENCOURAGE IT TO EVOLVE
- ACKNOWLEDGING THE WAYS THAT GENRES AND ARTIFACTS INTERACT WITH OTHER GENRES AND ARTIFACTS